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Interview with Harold Lloyd

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ARTHUR B. FRIEDMAN

Interview with Harold Lloyd

During the past several years, the tape-recording of interviews with persons who lived through important events has become a widespread practice. Mr. Friedman has been extending this recording of "oral history" to the especially ephemeral world of entertainment; his conversation with Harold Lloyd was one of a long series.

We present below excerpts from this interview which bear primarily on the atmosphere and working methods of the years when American screen comedy was at its height. It is easy to feel a certain nostalgia toward that period, with its free-and-easy creative élan. And this may not be pointless nostalgia. For, however tightly organized, script-bound, or rule-bound, routine production is today, there are also film-makers trying to get back to the more spontaneous use of the camera as a directly controlled instrument—as the French say, the "camera-stylo," with which one might "write" films as one writes a story or poem: Rossellini with his offhand shooting methods, Godard with his determinedly haphazard ones; the improvisation of "Shadows," the informal, candid documentaries of Leacock. With the spontaneity of Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd went endless work and a kind of freewheeling perfectionism, as one sees by watching "out-takes" of difficult scenes shot over and over again. But these masters of American comedy exploited the possibilities of their working conditions to make films of such suppleness and intensity of personal vision that they seem likely to last forever. From both their films and their ways of making them, we have much to learn.

Mr. Lloyd, in getting an idea for a film when you wanted to make a movie, how did you go about it? What kind of writers did you have with you? Where did you get your ideas? How did you get into production?

Well, as to the writers, we didn't exactly call them writers in those days. They were called idea men, or gag men. Not having dialogue at

that time, it was business, comedy business, that was all-important. So I kept a staff of from three to sometimes seven or eight. We paid these men very good salaries. I think we paid one man about eight hundred dollars a week. We never had a script in those days. We'd get an idea and the idea was developed more or less piecemeal. Now I'd take the idea men, and I'd work with them in a room. I'd come in and work with them in the morning or sometimes in the afternoon. They'd throw ideas at me and then it was up to me to choose the ones that I thought would be most appropriate or the ones that belonged to the particular film we were

From HAROLD LLOYD'S WORLD OF COMEDY (the new car sequence from HOT WATER). Other parts of the film are drawn from SAFETY LAST, THE FRESHMAN, WHY WORRY, GIRL SHY, PROFESSOR BEWARE, MOVIE CRAZY, and FEET FIRST. Released in New York in June.



doing. Then I'd send them out, maybe all to work separately, or I'd send them out in pairs, or break them up into different groups. And then each day they would come in with an idea. Maybe one fellow would come up with the suggestion and the suggestion itself may not have been exceptionally good, but if it had an idea it was up to us to recognize that idea and then the whole group of us started to work and develop that particular one.

Now were these ideas gags or what?

These were mostly gags, but remember our early stories. The gags were the important thing, and the story was sort of secondary.

When you started to think about creating a film, for example, did you look for a series of gags that might be strung together or was there some central idea around which the gags would evolve?

I think I'd better illustrate that with a picture, and let's take a picture that is quite well known—*Safety Last*. It probably met with as much acclaim, I think, as any picture we did. Here's how the birth of that story took place. I was in Los Angeles walking up Seventh Street and I saw this tremendous crowd gathered around a building, the Brockman Building. Upon inquiring I found out that a "human spider" was going to scale the side of that building. That naturally intrigues anyone, to see a feat of that kind performed. So I stayed around for awhile and pretty soon a rather young fellow came out and was introduced and there was a certain amount of commercialism attached to it at first. Without too much ado he started at the bottom of the building and started to climb up the side of this building. Well, it had such a terrific impact on me that when he got to about the third or fourth floor I couldn't watch him any more. My heart was in my throat and so I started walking on up the street. I walked about a block up the street; but, of course, I kept looking back all the time to see if he was still there. Finally I went around the corner. Silly as it is, I stood around the corner so I wouldn't watch him all the time, but every once in a while I'd stick my

head around the corner and see how he was progressing. I just couldn't believe that he could make that whole climb, but he did. After he finished it and arrived at the top, he rode a bicycle around the edge of it and then stood on the edge over the corner of it on a little projection they had there. Well, it was a tremendous feat as far as daring and fortitude is concerned. So I went back, went into the building, got up on the roof and met the young man, gave him my address and told him to come out. At that time I was with the Hal Roach Studios, and I told him to come out and visit Hal Roach and myself. His name was Bill Struthers.

He did come out and we put him on salary at that time although we didn't know just what we were going to do. I said that idea intrigues me, if it will do that to me, it certainly must be going to do that to an audience if we do it with the same effect you performed it. So we put him under contract and then we started to work out what was the most effective way to bring this climb on. Then we sat down with the writers and they worked out a little basic plot—that this boy was to come from a small town and was going to send for his sweetheart as soon as he made good; he gets a position in a department store and writes back to her that he is one of the executives of the store and it will only be a matter of time before he will send for her. In fact, he is just one of the clerks in one of the departments there. Well, she gets impatient and comes on. He finds out that she is coming and he knows that he's got to get some money. He devises with a pal of his who is a steeple-jack, one of these iron grid workers. He arranges for this sensational climb—this fellow climbs all over the buildings anyway in this picture. They talk the manager into it, saying that it's a great advertising exploitation feat. That was the basic idea of the plot that we had. With that to go on, it was embellished; there was your clothes rack, but the clothes were the pieces of business that either made the picture good or made it just an ordinary comedy. So we had to devise these gags. Now we didn't just get them all at once, because we would

work out a sequence or series of sequences and then we would shoot those. Then we would suspend action and come back and work some more. We kept changing our story as we went along and we found out that it worked better to go along a certain story-direction or idea line and then we would change it, so that would naturally change other things. Our whole story was very, very pliable.

In fact, on many of them we did the finish first. I think we did the finish on *Safety Last* first, we photographed that first. We had an idea how we were going to do the first part of it but we weren't sure. We did the climb to start with. And of course when we finished the climb we were gratified with it because it looked like it had what we were trying for, then we had tremendous enthusiasm to go back and get a beginning and a middle for it, and work up to the climb.

We tried that in *The Freshman* which had a football game for the finish. Well, we worked about two days on the football game but we just couldn't engender that enthusiasm or that feeling we should have had in that football game so we gave it up. Then we went back and started from the beginning. But in *The Freshman* all we started with was a one-line theme

and that was that. The boy had a great desire to go to college and be the most popular man in the school. We felt he would get off on the wrong foot and as his father stated as he left, they would either break his heart or his neck and they almost did both. But that was the whole theme: that the boy wanted to be the most popular boy in the whole school and the difficulties and troubles that ensued from that.

Now you mention a theme here. Is it true that for all of your films you had some kind of a basic theme or thread in the same way?

Yes, oh yes, you had to have one and the more it was really working for you the more chance you had to get a good picture. When I say something working for you, let me take this example again, the climb that we did in *Safety Last*. Now here is what can work for you besides local business and gags. This pal of mine, the steeple-jack was to make the climb. He had gotten into a little trouble with one of the local policemen there and even though his picture was printed so that he was going to do the climb without the face showing, the policeman recognized the clothes. When the climb was to start, the policeman was there because he had grievances against this particular character and was going to arrest him, which would

*The famous
human-fly
sequence from
Lloyd's
best-known
picture,
SAFETY LAST
(1923).*



ruin our climb. We saw the policeman standing there; and he said, "I can't go out there until we get rid of the policeman." So I made several efforts to get rid of the policeman without too much success.

Finally, my friend said, "Look, here's what we'll do—you go out and pretend that you are the mystery man and are going to make the climb. You just climb up to the first floor," he said, "and then for a moment you slip into the window. I'll change and put on your coat and hat and I'll go the rest of the way." Well, that was all right, except that I was scared to death to even climb to the first floor. I said, "I can't climb up to that first floor, I'll break my neck." But he finally talked me into it. I go out and I'm introduced with all the fanfare, and climb to the first floor; but while I'm climbing from the ground to the first floor, the cop happens to see him peeking around the corner and takes after him. He runs into the building and the policeman is after him. By the time I reach the first floor, he manages to open the door long enough to see me at the window and say you've got to make one more floor until I ditch this cop. I look at him in amazement. My God, I managed to make the first floor; making the second floor is just unheard of but I go ahead, expecting to be killed at any moment. And, of course, that continues during the whole climb. He doesn't ditch this cop, but everytime you see this little interjection coming in, "Go one more floor until I ditch this cop." In the last scene we see the policeman chasing him over to the roofs of the adjoining buildings and in a little time, coming out, he says, "You've got to keep going 'til I ditch the cop."

Now that's what I mean by something working for you, because all the time they thought I would be relieved or that I wouldn't go one more floor, and that makes all the other business much stronger because you've got something that is anticipated—"when will the other fellow help him out?" Now then, the same thing applies with a major story. The more interesting that you can make your character, the better. I don't mean that he has to be eccentric

but he's got to be a personality, not just the ordinary run. When he gets into difficulties, someone can envision that there is going to be fun here and think that he won't act like the normal person. When he gets into that trouble, what is he going to do? Then right away there is anticipation of what's going to happen with the trouble.

With comedy, trouble is one of the great ingredients because there are so many variations to it. You take the newspapers. What is mainly printed in newspapers?—Grief and trouble. I'd say 75 per cent of it, and maybe that's an understatement. Or listen to a news commentator on television or radio. I think they do that because people somehow get a feeling—well, *they* are all right now. Someone else is in trouble and everyone has enough complexities in life. It makes them feel a little better if somebody else is having difficulties too. In a picture if everything is happy and you're going along you won't run into any particular difficulties. But if you get yourself into a situation where you are liable to be killed, you're going to be sent to jail, you're going to lose all your money, you're going to be beat up, or innumerable things, right away you think "how's the man going to get out of it?" So it's the getting out of it, the surmounting it, the overcoming of obstacles that gives you the opportunity to create comedy.

When you were thinking of gags or pieces of business with the men who worked for you, the idea or gag men, what made you throw some gags away and keep others? What was it that made you judge that the audience would share your feeling?

Well, I think several things. Eventually as I went along it became experience, it was a certain amount of basic study, it was your own intuition, your own feeling toward what you thought was funny and what you didn't. In other words, I used to call it picking the wheat out of the chaff. We had one gag man who really gave me as many fine ideas as any idea man had ever given me, but I would say that only about one out of twenty of the ideas he

HAROLD LLOYD

gave me were good, the other nineteen were very mediocre. Later on when I stopped working, I tried to send him to other people and they would say, what are you trying to do, he's the worst man I've ever talked to. Well, they wanted every idea to be good. I recognized that every once in a while he would come out with a little gem. And that one idea was worth all the poor ones that he'd throw at me. But you had to rely upon your own judgment to recognize that particular idea and I think that was one of my fortes in the comedy field. Whether it came through experience or was just a feeling for comedy that I had, I don't know. But I don't say that I didn't let a lot of very good business go by. I had fairly good success from the standpoint of laughter, either they gave me so many I couldn't miss or my judgment proved to be pretty good.

Certainly it was the latter. And I'd like to ask this. You had a good deal of training, as you described it earlier on this recording, in stock companies in the theater and you had varied training in the motion pictures playing all kinds of things. This included different comedy characters until you developed the "glass character," as you refer to the Harold Lloyd most of the world has known for these many years. This was a training ground for you that, I suppose, permitted you to judge ideas for your own use in terms of the essence of your own character. Do you suppose that any of these things can be learned through an organized process? For an example, could a student go through some kind of university training in a department such as we have, in which some of these basic things could be handed down?

I don't think that you can pinpoint it to that degree. I think that a man to achieve real success or popularity has got to have a bent for it to start with. Then the studying of it, the observing, and the trial and error will bring him out and make him either great or just ordinary. But I can envision a great many individuals who just don't have a funny bone in their body; and I think those men could study forever and they would find that they



Harold Lloyd in THE FRESHMAN (1925).

had chosen the wrong profession. You might get someone who has a fair knowledge of comedy and with a great deal of diligent work and concentration he might make himself a very fine comedian. I think they should have a feeling for it. But underneath it all, I do think that to rise above the ordinary strata of comedy you've got to be a student of comedy and know what basic ideas you're trying to project in the comedy line and the humorous end. In other words, you'll find a lot of people, both men and women, who in the ordinary walk of life are very funny and very amusing to their friends in a party. People laugh at them and say, "Oh, you should be on the stage." Well, you take that particular person (I don't say there aren't exceptions to the rule) you take that particular person and they are very sad sometimes when they get out in front of an audience. The audience just doesn't seem to catch the quality that the intimate group has found. When they get up there and have got to have a routine, when they've got to have a whole act, then it becomes another thing. They seem to tighten up.

Or you take the reverse: sometimes your best comedians, who have probably scored on the vaudeville stage, in musical comedy, in pictures, television, it doesn't make any difference what medium you use—sometimes those people, when you meet them off stage, you would never suspect they are funny men. They just don't let

go, they don't seem to have the desire for it. Maybe it's like a lot of people who like to dress up, like to go to masquerades, or like to go out on Hallowe'en like kids do. In other words, they like to become another personality from what they are, to express themselves in different ways. Well, actors are expressing themselves in different ways all the time. So you'll find that a great many actors have had enough of that and when they are in ordinary life they just don't feel funny or they don't want to act funny.

I wonder if you could sum up what you believe the essence of your comedy was, the essence of the comedy character that you created and maintained over a number of years.

The character that I finally devised could be your nextdoor neighbor. He was just a young man who wore glasses. He kind of thought a little out of the normal group, though. In a great many of the stories that we devised it looked like he never had a chance to succeed or he couldn't overcome what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles. But he had great concentration and determination; and regardless of how hopeless a situation looked, he just seemed to keep going ahead and succeeded in the end. Now with all that, he had to be a character that you liked, so you had a sympathy for him, but at the same time he struck you as an odd, amusing, pathetic type of character. You not only laughed at him but you laughed with him. And of course, to go into the basic ideas of comedy there, they seem to be unending.

It has occurred to me that the character that you created and maintained over all these years was perhaps a nearer reflection to our country's personality during these years than any other performer had achieved. The same brash quality, the success with the hope—it seems to me that there was a very close correlation between the character that you created and the personality of our country, particularly during those days. Would you say that was true?

Well, there have been several articles printed that stated very similar points. I think as I

said before that he is the fellow you see walking down the street, that you pass all the time. He wears ordinary clothes, he wears glasses as really his only distinguishing mark. It's his attitude towards things, it's the difficulties that he gets into and how he surmounts them, that makes the comedy out of it. Otherwise, he isn't what you might call a comic character and I didn't try to devise a lot of eccentricities like so many other comedians. He was just an ordinary boy that you liked. You were interested in his problems because his problems were ones that you might have gotten into yourself.

These ordinary qualities are one of the elements that perhaps gave it its universal quality.

Of course, in doing something one person does it one way, another person another way. In fact, if you took the same situation and the same piece of business and let ten different people do it, all ten of them would do it in a little different individual way. You'd find that one person seems to have a flare to bring out a certain quality that maybe the rest of them don't. For instance, I'm thinking of some present characters—you take George Gobel, for example. He has a completely individual style. The same thing with Gleason. You could give that same material to scores of others (this is more or less in the dialogue end of it) and they wouldn't begin to present it with the same character or individuality that these two gentlemen do.

Do you have any plans for more film work?

Yes, I'm working on one right now: *Harold Lloyd's Festival of Comedy*. This is going to start before there was any color naturally or sound, and of course, no wide screen. In fact, many of the people who will be viewing it hadn't been born when it happened. It isn't going to be a story in the sense of a beginning, a middle, and a finish; it's going to be highlights taken from a great many of the Harold Lloyd comedies that have been seen and, I think, enjoyed by millions of people practically in every country in the world. (I think laughter is the universal language.) Now this is going to

begin in the late 'teens, go through the roaring 'twenties and into the late 'thirties—a span of about twenty years. As I say, we're going to start it with a two-reeler and carry it on through. I got the idea for doing this because my son, who is now around about twenty-four, was not born when I made all these comedies, but he's run the biggest majority of them. He hasn't seen them all and he's gotten such a kick out of them; and he said, "Why don't you pass this on to the generation that I belong to. I think that you're keeping them all bottled up." It was really because of that that we started. It's still in a rough state but it's been received exceptionally well. In fact, it gets more laughs than any film we put together.

In working on this festival of Harold Lloyd comedies, have you come upon one film that seems to be your favorite?

I have three favorites—*Grandma's Boy*, *Safety Last*, and *The Freshman*. They are all entirely different.

I've noticed that your comedies seem to be based on adventure and suspense, danger, and as you mentioned, light romance. This was particularly true in the silent films that were marked with unusual success. Did the advent of sound pose any particular problems for you or change your comedy style?

Yes, I think it did to a certain degree. It required our more or less having a definite story. This was much more necessary when you put dialogue into it. Before, we could say what came to our minds in the silent days and it was the pantomime, the action that was paramount. The audience couldn't read your lips. But when dialogue came into it, it meant that you really had to sit down and work out some normal, everyday dialogue that was fitting. That demanded more of a story and a little different type of procedure. Though the first one that I made was silent and only later was adapted to

sound. We didn't have too much difficulty putting sound into it, but I think if we had had more competent dialogue writers at that time, we could have made that phase of it infinitely better. In fact, to carry on with that line of thought, I believe that comedies with dialogue tend to rely, especially in the early days of sound, entirely on words. Too much so. The pantomime began to more or less disappear. Recently they have been coming back to it. But for a long time, in one period it was all quips, wisecracks, little verbal-comedy sayings; the visual had practically disappeared from it. Now many are coming back with it; for instance, Skelton does a tremendous amount of pantomime now, Jack Benny is very clever at putting it in his television show. Gleason has been doing it very well, and Danny Kaye. There's a great many of them now. And I think they are very wise because it was becoming a lost art for a while. They are beginning to come to the conclusion now, that you don't have to talk every moment that the film is running. We don't do that in real life. Just because you are doing business, it isn't necessary to have dialogue to accompany it. Stevens, a very fine director, is one who exemplifies that in some of the fine pictures he has done. He's had long stretches of film with no dialogue in it at all. There's something real and natural. Ford's another one who has done it. But for a long period people thought they had to talk all the time.



AS GRANDMA'S BOY (1922).